

National Guard Deployments May Strain Emergency Response Capabilities

Substantial National Guard deployments are causing some states to worry that they may not be able to handle unforeseen emergencies, The Associated Press reported. Approximately one-quarter of the 460,000-strong National Guard is presently deployed, the highest percentage since the Korean War. According to Chris Reynolds, a battalion fire chief in Tampa and professor for disaster management at the American Military University, the deployments have become more frequent and longer and have had a direct effect on states' emergency response capabilities. Some states are feeling the burden more than others. Nearly 81 percent of Idaho's Guard is overseas, while only 12 percent of Texas's is currently deployed. Despite the apparently grim outlook, Guard leaders are confident of their ability to handle states' emergency needs. However, a 29 April General Accounting Office (GAO) report warned that overseas deployments could strain the Guard's stateside missions. According to the report, "Equipment and personnel may not be available to the states when they are needed... Moreover, the Guard may have difficulty ensuring that each state has access to units with specialized capabilities - such as engineering or medical assets..." Jim Wright, deputy director of California's Department of Forestry, said that California (and possibly other states) could turn to private contractors or call on other states for needed help.

ANALYSIS: The GAO and Associated Press reports provide grounds for concern as the country battles an already troubling drought and prepares for what promises to be a highly active hurricane season, as well as a potential terrorist attack. States rely on National Guardsmen to alleviate the tremendous burden of emergency management, often when first responders have become overtaxed or when stabilization is required after initial first responses. They are also the last line of defense during natural disasters and civil emergencies. The Guard depletion is especially critical since many reservists work in public safety and emergency response. *The Boston Globe* reported that cities and towns throughout the country have experienced an increase in downsizing of police and fire departments and other public safety agencies through layoffs or attrition. Many departments have acknowledged that, as a result, they are unprepared for a terrorist attack. Some states, such as Massachusetts, have suggested that funding for homeland security be focused on regional needs by funneling funds through a system that allows communities to share specialized equipment or specially trained personnel.

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